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Gulf householding: implications of gulf migration for social reproduction

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ABSTRACT

This paper introduces the idea of ‘Gulf householding’ to reflect on migrant households that send their members to the Arab Gulf states for work and rely on material and non-material supports for formation and sustenance of households. Millions of households in the global South receive remittances from the Arab Gulf states, amounting to more than US\$135 billion annually, and this vast amount of household income is a manifestation of Gulf householding. The paper examines the implications of Gulf householding for social reproduction by centring on key spheres of household activities. Empirically, this study draws on interviews with Gulf migrant households at a village in Bihar, India. This research reports that access to the Gulf labour market and remittances shapes the quality of life of Gulf households. This study suggests that research on Gulf householding across multiple countries and regions has the potential to underscore the complex development processes from below.

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Gulf migration; labour migration; Gulf householding; remittances; Arab Gulf states; the GCC

Introduction

The Arab Gulf states historically has been a hub for mercantile and colonial forms of migration, which brought people from throughout the world to it, but the discovery of oil and the subsequent rise in oil prices in the 1970s changed the scale and nature of these migrations (AlShehabi 2015; Alsudairi and Abusharaf 2015; Matsukawa, Watanabe, and Babar 2023; Seccombe 1983; Vora 2013). As the oil era progressed, the pace and scale of development across the region increased to such a point that local labour could no longer meet the demand for labour created by large-scale development projects and a viable solution is found by hiring millions of migrants from around the world. As a result, migration patterns to the Arab Gulf states have entered a new era since the 1970s, in which the Gulf states have become the prime destination for labour migration (Gardner 2010; Ishii et al. 2020; Kamrava and Babar 2012; Lori 2012; Matsukawa,

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Watanabe, and Babar 2023; Sahoo 2015). Numerically speaking, the six oil-rich Arab Gulf states, popularly known as the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) states, which consist of Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), host around 35 million migrant workers or approximately 10 per cent of the global migrants.¹ They are temporary migrants and subject to strict rules and regulations for the continuation of their residence permit status across the Gulf states (Hertog 2012; Jureidini 2019; Kapiszewski 2001; Longva 1997; Rajan, Pattath, and Tohidimehr 2023).

The bulk of the migrants in the Gulf are unskilled or semi-skilled workers, and a tiny minority are skilled and professional migrants with the rights to live with family members. Migration policy stipulates restrictions on work stints for both groups of migrants; however, unskilled and semi-skilled migrants who constitute the vast majority of migrants in the Gulf, cannot bring their family members with them (Ahmed 2012; Hussain 2016; Jureidini 2019; Looney 1994; Rahman 2012; Vora and Koch 2015). Therefore, one of the salient features of Gulf migration is the separation of labour from householding. Migrant workers are not eligible to become permanent residents or citizens, and they are quickly discarded when economies suffer crises, as has been the case repeatedly in recent decades including the 2008 financial crisis, the 2017 Qatar blockade, the Covid-19 pandemic (Rahman and Hasan 2022; Rajan 2020; Rajan and Oommen 2020; Ullah, Nawaz, and Chattoraj 2021; Zweiri, Rahman, and Kamal 2021). Thus, the result is that migration policy promotes the formation and sustenance of households in more than one country – the country of origin and country of residence in the GCC states- or household splitting. These policies of allowing only labour without households are ubiquitous in the GCC states and many other migrant-receiving countries in the global South (Dito 2015; Ishii et al. 2020; Osella and Osella 2012; Rahman and Ullah 2012; Winckler 2017).

Mike Douglass identifies this phenomenon of household splitting across countries and the formation and sustenance of households and introduces the idea of ‘global householding’, to explain this rapidly growing and widely prevalent phenomenon in Asia-Pacific region (Douglass 2006, 2014). Douglass approaches ‘global householding’ as a process rather than a fixed unit of study, and is ‘used to convey the understanding that creating and sustaining a household is an ongoing, dynamic social process that covers all life-cycle stages and extends beyond the family’ (Douglass 2006, 423). In short, Douglass sees household as a basic unit of social reproduction and a principal locus of social relations that ranges from physical reproduction to material and emotional well-being (Douglass 2006, 2014). He observes that the formation and sustenance of household is increasingly reliant on the global movement of people and transactions (remittances) among household members residing in more than one country (Douglass 2006).

However, Mike Douglass’s ‘global householding’ is global in scope and offers framework for understanding householding in the context of population movements involving different types, patterns, and destinations of migration in the global South as well as global North. Historically, there are some inter-regional migration systems in the global South, involving regular flows of millions of individuals seeking jobs in a particular, wealthy region temporarily. Over time, this inter-regional migration has evolved into an irreversible phenomenon in those regions, in which the receiving countries have become structurally dependent on migrant labour from particular sending countries and regions. The South Asia-Gulf migration corridor is a case in point (Chapparban

2021; Naufal, Malit, and Genc 2016; Vora 2013). Borrowing from Douglass's notion of 'global householding', we propose a more regionally focused term, 'Gulf householding' to reflect on migrant households that send members to the GCC states and rely on material and non-material supports for formation and sustenance of households in social reproduction back home. Since migrants undergo similar exit and entry policy under kafala system and experience almost identical socio-economic conditions in the Gulf, there is a uniformity in migration outcomes for individual migrants. This makes the use of the notion of Gulf householding more relevant in the Gulf migration context. This Gulf migration-centric analysis of the householding is expected to offer more nuanced understanding of householding across regional migration corridors in the global South. The analytical power of Gulf householding or original 'global householding' lies in its ability to address the activities of both deterritorialized members (in the country of residence) and territorialised members (in the country of origin) of the household (Porio 2007) and its potential to offer more deeper derstanding of the complex nexus involving migration and householding.

The Arab Gulf region can be an ideal locus for the examination of householding-migration nexus; because the region has maintained the status of principal destination for some source regions in the global South (Ishii et al. 2020; Jain and Oommen 2017; Jain and Oommen 2017; Rahman, Babu, and Ansari 2023; Rajan and Oommen 2020; Vora 2013). The temporary nature of Gulf migration is managed through the use of entry and exit policy of migration control (Babar and Gardner 2016; Khan and Harroff-Tavel 2011; Malit and Naufal 2016). We see Gulf migration, not simply the movement of labour, is the process that is changing the face of many source regions such as South Asia (Leonard 2002; 2003; Rajan and Saxena 2019; Shah 2010). However, the empirical scope of this paper is limited to India, the largest migrant-source country for the GCC states.

According to the World Bank, total global remittance was US\$831 billion in 2022, with US\$656 billion or more than 79 percent going to developing countries (World Bank Group 2023, 1). Remittances support the livelihoods of more than one billion people throughout the world, or approximately one in eight people.² The massive inflows of migrant remittances to developing countries demonstrate the power of householding in international migration. Considering the sheer magnitude of remittances, it becomes impossible to ignore the influence of remittances on global householding in social reproduction (Gidwani and Ramamurthy 2018; Ullah 2012). A number of South Asian countries have become highly dependent upon sending migrants to the Gulf states and thus sustain their economies at the macro level. In 2021, the total outbound remittances for the GCC states stood at nearly US\$ 135 billion, making the Arab Gulf region the number one for outward remittances globally.³ More importantly, this tremendous amount of remittances as household incomes reaches millions of migrant households in the global South without much bureaucratic hassles (Rahman and Yeoh 2008).

Remittance flows to countries in South Asia were nearly 176 billion in 2022. A record \$111 billion in remittances were received by India in 2022 (World Bank Group 2023). In 2021, India received a total of around 89.38 billion dollars in international remittances, with the six Arab Gulf states contributing nearly 52 billion dollars, accounting for over fifty percent of the total remittances the country received.⁴ The Arab Gulf states have

been a favoured destination for low-skilled and semi-skilled migrants from India (Rahman, Babu, and Ansari 2023; Rajan and Saxena 2019; Rajan and Oommen 2020; Sahoo 2023). However, migration data especially total number of Indian migrants in each GCC state is not systematically recorded in migration statistics. One of the reliable sources has been the UNDESA reports, which suggests that the number of Indian migrants in GCC countries rose from nearly 2 million in 1990 to nearly 9.3 million in 2019 (UNDESA 2019). According to the UNDESA report, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, among the six GCC countries, hosted about 50 percent of the total Indian migrants, residing in the Gulf states (UNDESA 2019).

Broadly, this paper explores the nexus between Gulf migration and householding by centring on key spheres of householding. Specifically, this study examines what happens to Gulf households whose members move to Gulf states for employment and non-migrant households whose members do not migrate to Gulf states and stay in their villages. Empirically, we conduct the fieldwork in a village in Bihar, India. We have taken a small sample of migrant and non-migrant households in this village study to zoom into migration-induced dynamics across multiple spheres of householding. One of the major advantages of the micro-study is its ability to provide minute details when comparing and contrasting various aspects of householding across migration lines. We organise the paper as follows: the next section discusses the theoretical issues related to the migration-householding nexus, followed by a section on research methods. In the subsequent sections, we analyse householding in social reproduction by looking at multiple spheres of householding that include food security and nutrition, education, gender relations, medicalcare, housebuilding, and debt relations. We conclude with key findings and agenda for future research.

Theoretical issues

There is a legacy of theoretical models of household behaviour and decision-making in agrarian studies (Carr 2005; Chayanov 1966; for details, see Djurfeldt 2021) that are employed in the field of rural-urban population movements in migration studies (Harris and Todaro 1970; Lewis 1954). These models view migration as a way of maximising incomes and use individuals as a unit of analysis (Lewis 1954) and a later improved version incorporates households as a unit of analysis and see migration as a strategy of minimising risks tied to agricultural households and a variety of market failures in the developing world (Stark 1991). A primary focus of research in migration and livelihood studies is how households organise their labour and distribute it across geographical lines by allowing certain members to migrate. It views households' use of both material and immaterial resources as part of their survival strategy (Bebbington 2000; Chambers and Conway 1992; de Haan 1999; De Haan and Zoomers 2005; Ellis 1998; McDowell and de Haan 1997; Tanle 2015). Livelihood studies enrich our understanding of multi-local livelihoods in the developing world (Bergeron 2010; Djurfeldt 2014; Rajan and Pillai 2020; Sunam, Barney, and McCarthy 2021).

Livelihood studies later introduce several new concepts such as 'trans-local livelihoods' (Jacka 2018; Greiner 2012; Naumann and Greiner 2017; Steinbrink and Niedenfürh 2020), 'trans-local householding' and 'mobile householding' (Djurfeldt 2021; Gidwani and Ramamurthy 2018; Locke, Nguyen, and Nguyen 2014), transnational

livelihood (Raj and Rahman 2023; Sunam, Barney, and McCarthy 2021); and ‘transnational family’ (Bryceson and Vuorela 2002). Thus, we find a burgeoning of conceptual vocabularies that views migration as a movement from one locality (country) to another (country) and that contributes significantly to liberating migration research from rigid nation-state frameworks (Douglass 2006). In essence, these concepts reveal an unfolding empirical reality that people not only move between multiple locations, but also interact with and relate to multiple spaces on a cultural, social, and emotional levels. Moving beyond individual migrants as workers and diasporas, attention needs to be directed to migrant households stayed behind in countries of origin (Safri and Graham 2010). This study looks at this dimension, that is, how the households formed and sustained in the country of origin after migration of household members to the Gulf states.

On the research frontier involving international migration and their households stayed behind, Mike Douglass introduced the idea of ‘global householding’ to capture the complex formation and sustenance of householding across international boarder (Douglass 2006; 2014). He observes that people are increasingly moving internationally and conducting transactions with members of their households who reside in more than one country (Douglass 2006). It is basically economic and emotional interdependence, as well as decision-making structures, which link these households and make these split households recognisable as one entity, notwithstanding their international distribution (Douglass 2006). In spite of the fact that labour migration is often portrayed with negative connotations like exploitation and human rights issues, he suggests that global householding does have benefits that offer hope and optimism to millions of households in the developing countries (Douglass 2006).

As a result of these underlying hopes and optimism, the maintenance of households relies heavily on adding migrants to households and thus householding transcends national borders. In line with Douglass’s arguments, existing literature also suggests that the welfare of households has been increasingly linked to overseas employments (Agarwala 2022; AlShebabi, Hanieh, and Khalaf 2014; Babar 2017; 2020; Rahman and Yong 2015; Rahman, Yong, and Ullah 2014a; 2014b; Raj and Rahman 2023). Each global household may comprise multiple dwelling units in both host and home countries (Safri and Graham 2010). However, this study centres on households in the country of origin and empirically, it addresses the households of those migrants who choose to go to the GCC states for employment and we refer to these households as ‘Gulf households’ and their householding as ‘Gulf householding’ in our paper. We prefer to use household, because in contrast with the family, a household can include people not related by blood or marriage, such as domestic workers, fictive relatives, and even friends (Agesa 2004; Douglass 2006; Jellinck 1991).

Implications of global householding for social reproduction is relatively a new approach to documenting the dynamics of migration-induced householding (Locke, Seeley, and Rao 2013). Household is a basic unit of social reproduction and a principal locus of social relations that goes beyond the physical reproduction of human life and embraces the material and emotional well-being and socio-cultural mores of its members (Folbre 1986). Social reproduction carries multiple meanings from the biological reproduction to numerous practices that facilitate social systems to reproduce (Peterson 2010). Social reproduction refers primarily to activities occurring in

households and indispensable for guaranteeing the continuity of families and communities on a daily and generational basis. The activities encompass providing basic human necessities, physical and emotional care, and socialising children into culturally appropriate identities, behaviours, and belief systems (Hoang and Yeoh 2012; Peterson 2010). Broadly speaking, social reproduction produces members of society who are capable of performing different roles in a socially desirable manner as member of the society (Peterson 2010). Migration has been a source of resources for many households in the developing world that guarantees householding in social reproduction. We address Gulf householding in social reproduction by limiting the analysis to multiple spheres of household activities that include food and nutrition, education, medical care, gender relations, housebuilding, and debt repayment. To capture the dynamics of householding across migration lines, we investigate both Gulf migrant households and non-migrant households.

Generally, global householding is manifested in the enormous amount of remittance sent by international migrants to their households in the country of origin (Docquier and Rapoport 2012; Rapoport and Docquier 2006; Rössel, Schenk, and Pap 2023). Remittance is often referred to 'direct to the poor' (Eversole 2005; Ullah 2010), because it is generally transferred to and received by the members of the migrant households without any intermediary between migrants overseas and their members in the country of origin (Brown et al. 2014; Rahman and Yong 2015; Rahman, Yong, and Ullah 2014a; 2014b). The purpose of remittances is to maintain contact and reproduce relationships with the household that has been separated by international migration of labour (Carling and Hoelscher 2013; Erdal and Carling 2021; Zelizer 2006). Furthermore, remittances are a form of economic behaviour rooted in social relations, cultural scripts, and normative obligations (for details, see Rössel, Schenk, and Pap 2023). While economic remittances are generally reported in existing literature, there is also social remittances, which refers to the transfer of social and political ideas, behaviours, and capital (Levitt 1998). A sociological perspective to Gulf householding and remittances is timely and crucial, considering the large and increasing inflows of Gulf remittances to India.

There exists substantial literature on migration, remittances and development in the global South (Adams 2003; Aggarwal, Demirguc-Kunt, and Peria 2011; Asis 2000; Cohen 2005; De Haas 2010; de Bruyn and Kuddus 2005; Gamburd 2002; Hammar et al. 1997; Hugo 2003; Madhavan 1985; Mahapatro et al. 2017; Nyberg-Sorensen 2012; Stinner, de Albuquerque, and Bryce-Laporte 1982; Rahman 2009, 2015; Rahman and Hossain 2015; Sahoo 2015; 2021; 2023; Ullah 2017). Research on remittances in South Asia touches upon various aspects such as food security and consumption (Azizi 2018; Choithani 2017; Dash, Gupta, and Singh 2023; Ramcharran 2017; Ratha 2013); social and cultural aspects of remittance uses (Glystos 2007; Goldring 2004; Kurien 2008; Nayyar 1994; Rahman 2009); use of remittances in small businesses (Aggarwal, Demirguc-Kunt, and Peria 2011; Ahmed, Dzator, and Achaempong 2023; Arif 2004; Kadozi 2019; Kuhn 1999; Mohanty, Dubey, and Parida 2014; Parida, Mohanty, and Raman 2015; Ratha 2013; Ratha 2013; Seddon 2004; Seddon, Adhikari, and Gurung 2002; Thieme and Wyss 2005; Zachariah, Mathew, and Rajan 2001); remittances and disaster (Mohapatra, Joseph, and Ratha 2012); remittance transfers (Malit, AlAwad, and Naufal 2017; Rahman and Yeoh 2008); social mobility (Burki 1991; Gamburd 2002; Islam 1991); changes in gender roles, educational enrolment, health care, and quality of life

(Boer 1981; Bhagat and Ali 2021; Debnath and Nayak 2022; Hadi 1999; Oda 2004; Faraizi 1993; Ullah 2010; Lasagabaster, Maimbo, and Hulugalle 2005; Mishra, Kondratjeva, and Shively 2022; Nepal 2016; Arif 2004; Nayyar 1994; Rahman 2013; Zachariah, Mathew, and Rajan 2001); and changes in the status of women (Dannecker 2005; Kurien 2008; Rahman 2011; Seddon, Adhikari, and Gurung 2002; Thieme and Siegmann 2010).

Thus, the existing literature comes from different perspectives and reports complexly interwoven relationship between migration, remittances, and development in South Asia and beyond. There also exists migration scholarship that addresses various aspects of South Asian migration to the Gulf states including various family aspects of labour migration. However, what is particularly missing is to take a householding perspective to this inter-regional migration corridor and delve into the dynamics of formation and sustenance of householding across. A householding perspective to migration research views household a primary unit of social reproduction and promotes migration research from the below. Considering the fact that remittances are private funds and an important source of income for millions of households in the developing countries, a householding perspective to Gulf migration is potential to capture the nuanced dynamics of migration, householding, and development from the below. Empirically, this study addresses this lacuna by shedding light on Gulf migration, householding, and social reproduction in an Indian village.

Research methods

This study is basically a qualitative study that draws on the experiences of Gulf migrant households and non-migrant households in a selected village in an Indian state of Bihar in 2023. While Southern Indian states have been the traditional source of labour migration to the Gulf states and a highly researched region for Indian migration studies (Joseph 1988; Rajan 2004; Zachariah, Mathew, and Rajan 2001), Northern and Eastern Indian states have received scant attention from migration scholars (Mahapatro 2018), giving a rationale for choosing an Eastern Indian state of Bihar for this fieldwork. The Indian states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar have become emerging migrant-source states for the GCC states since the early 2000s (Bhagat and Kumar 2021; Dutta 2023; Raj and Reddy 2022). We have chosen the district of Begusarai and identified a number of villages that are leading source villages for Gulf migration, such as Garhara, Baro, Papraur, Pokharia, Hajipur, Saidpur Hans and Bihat. Considering our access and convenience, we have eventually selected Garhara village for fieldwork.

Garhara village is located within the Barauni Block of the Begusarai District, situated on the border between the districts of Begusarai and Patna. The village is divided into different tolas (informal village units) based on the classifications of caste, sub-caste, and demographic features. We found over hundred Gulf households that have at least one family member working in the GCC countries at present in Garhara and the nearby villages. We selected five Gulf households that have at least one member presently employed in the Gulf with accumulated at least five years of working experience. We included the five-year working experiences to clearly understand remittance-induced household dynamics in social reproduction. Given the complex social hierarchy and access to resources in the different caste systems in the Hindu community, we have chosen Gulf households belonging to the Muslim community and possessing somewhat

similar socio-economic status in the social hierarchy of the village. We have chosen five non-migrant households from the same village with similar socioeconomic and religious characteristic (Muslim households) to ensure a reasonable comparison.

We have used semi-structured interview schedules to conduct interviews with adult members of migrant and non-migrant households. We interviewed remittance recipients and other senior male and female members and talked to senior members separately for getting better insights into household dynamics. For non-migrant households, we conducted interviews with household heads. The semi-structured interview schedule contains questions for detailed information on socioeconomic and demographic profiles of the households, reasons behind migration to the Gulf region, control and management of remittances, use of remittances on food and nutrition, access to education and healthcare services, housebuilding, debt repayment, changes in socioeconomic status, and broader life chances. The interview schedule, thus, aims to cover a wide variety of topics and gain a deeper understanding of Gulf householding and Gulf remittances. The average duration of an interview conducted with a Gulf household was around two and a half hours, while with non-migrant households it was approximately one hour. One of the authors is from Bihar, and he conducted the fieldwork in the local language.

All surveyed migrant households come from joint families, with an average family size of 10 members. Saudi Arabia, followed by the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, emerged as the preferred destination for them. Migrants typically remain in the GCC states for 12 years, with one migrant having worked there for nearly 20 years. In most households, the migrant's father is the recipient and manager of remittances, which average \$365⁵ per month at the time of interview. There was an additional source of income available to every household, with at least one member of the family employed in the informal sector or in agriculture. Only two migrant wives were employed, while the remainder were engaged primarily in domestic duties. Most households owned only a small amount of farm land that was not sufficient for subsistence living. In the majority of cases, households lived in pucca houses, which usually had one or two floors.

All five non-migrant households lived together in a joint family arrangement, headed by male members. One non-migrant household had a male employee who worked as a fourth-grade employee for the government. In contrast, the primary source of income for the other households was either farming, working in the informal sector near Barauni and Begusarai, or running tailoring shops, among other things. Most households had children who attended nearby government schools. There were no employed female members in non-migrant households, and domestic duties were primarily performed by female members. Finally, we acknowledge that despite our efforts, there are some limitations in data collection, and that the duration of fieldwork was limited due to time and financial constraints.

Food security and nutrition intakes

A considerable amount of remittances is dedicated to ensuring food security and improving the nutritional well-being of migrant households in rural India (Chintamani and Kulkarni 2023). Based on interviews conducted with migrant households, it was found that 30–40 percent of remittances are devoted to food and nutrition expenses. Nevertheless, food and nutrition expenses are impacted by various aspects, such as the number of

individuals in the households, the dietary preferences of household members, and the number of income earners. A migrant's father (HH 1) narrated:

My family consists of nine people, with the primary source of income coming from my son working in Saudi Arabia. A substantial proportion of the remittances he transfers to us are primarily allocated towards fulfilling our family's food and nutritional needs, with a portion being retained for other necessary things. (A migrant's father, Garhara village, Begusarai district, August 2023)

Thus, Gulf remittances have undoubtedly bolstered the family's ability to ensure food security. When questioned about the differences between the pre- and post-migration stages, the participants instantly emphasised that the funds transferred from the Gulf not only supported the purchase of necessary food items but also allowed families to obtain commodities that were previously unaffordable. In the post-migration period, households experienced a rise in the number of meals, an increase in the purchasing of high-quality staple foods, and an increase in the intake of food products such as fruits, vegetables, eggs, milk, and meat. Overall, it was found that remittances have enabled Gulf households to improve food and nutrition consumption. A migrant's wife (HH 4) narrated:

My husband used to work here as a wage earner under a contractor before migrating to Saudi Arabia in 2015. Income before migration was inadequate for us, and we were financially unstable. Our standard of living, particularly regarding food security and access to high-quality commodities, has significantly improved since he migrated to the Gulf. (A migrant's wife, Garhara village, Begusarai district, August 2023)

In addition to contributing to food security, remittances serve as a form of insurance for migrant households during lean seasons. Remittances allow Gulf households to bolster their resilience against inflationary forces that affect essential food commodities such as vegetables, oil, milk, legumes, and meat. The COVID-19 pandemic is a case in point. The nationwide lockdown during the pandemic affected negatively the marginalised and disadvantaged sections of society in India. The economic disruptions brought on by the pandemic led to negative consequences, including job losses, reduced income, and less income-earning opportunities at the community level. Gulf households also shared their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. There has been a cessation of remittance inflows due to the loss of jobs for migrants in the Gulf. Household members repeatedly described how access to the Gulf labour market enabled them to overcome the decline in remittances and subsequent decrease in disposable incomes during the pandemic. For instance, a migrant's wife (HH 2) narrated:

Initially, we could sustain ourselves by spending the savings we had accumulated over time. However, our savings dried up soon, and we stopped receiving remittances during Covid-19. We even cut down on regular meals and sought credit to maintain basic consumption. We approached a local grocery owner who knew about our family and my husband's employment in Saudi Arabia. The grocery owner showed confidence in our financial capacity due to my husband's residency in the Gulf and provided us with necessary grocery items on credit. We received grocery items at a regular price and paid off our bills after almost one year. (A migrant's wife, Garhara village, Begusarai district, August 2023)

In interviewing non-migrant households, we found some disparities in staple food consumption, such as rice, wheat, legumes, etc. Non-migrant households obtained their essential food products through their meagre local incomes, resulting in unreliable

incomes for essential consumption. Their ability to purchase nutritious food products such as fruits, eggs, milk, and meat was limited almost year-round. In addition to food product quality, non-migrant households exhibited irregular and inconsistent food consumption. Non-migrant households devoted a greater proportion of their income to food and nutrition expenses than migrant households, affecting their ability to meet other needs. Although migrant households risked their sustenance by relying on remittances, they managed the remittance shocks or declines by using social relations at the community level. Access to the Gulf labour market provides Gulf households with social insurance that ensures sustenance in unforeseen circumstances.

Educational attainment

Gulf households attach significant importance to education for their members. Therefore, a large portion of remittances is allocated to educational expenses in some migrant households. Some of the areas for educational expenses are school fees, private tuition fees, purchasing relevant stationary items, hostel fees, uniform fees, and other education-related expenses. Migrant households tend to send their children to private schools for better education. Private schools charge higher tuition fees and they often offer instructions and examinations in English. The government runs public schools, which charge a minimal fee, but the quality of education is often disputed, particularly in rural areas. Therefore, parents who can afford school fees tend to send their children to private schools. A migrant's wife (HH 4) narrated:

My husband and I understand the importance of education for our children, and we spend a great deal of time and money on our children. My eldest son studies in a residential school in Begusarai district. The other two sons are enrolled in an English medium school (private school). We can afford this only because of remittances. (A migrant's wife, village Garhara, Begusarai District, August 2023)

However, it was observed that not all migrant households sampled could afford high education expenses for their children. This can be attributed to various factors, including family size, family composition, duration of stay in the Gulf region, existing or recurring financial burdens such as debt obligations, and other sources of income. As the size of households increases, there is a corresponding decrease in per capita income. This consequently hinders the capacity to afford quality education for all children. Another revelation was that the recipient of remittances played a significant role in determining the allocation of funds. When Gulf wives receive remittances, a substantial proportion of funds are allocated towards their children's education. Conversely, when parents receive remittances, there is evidence of a disproportionate distribution of funds towards educational expenses. A migrant's sister-in-law (HH 5) narrated:

Our family has six children. While we aspire to enroll all our children in reputable English medium schools, financial constraints prevent us from doing so. We send our children to government schools and provide private home tutors where possible. Anyway, my father-in-law decides about educational expenses. (A migrant's sister-in-law, village Garhara, Begusarai District, August 2023)

In general, the household that has access to the Gulf labour market and remittances is expected to shoulder additional responsibilities within the primary group members

and uphold the principle of generosity and good Muslim in the community. The interviews reveal that migrants have utilised remittances not solely to support their immediate family members but also to facilitate the educational goals of other household members who are not living under the same roof as a migrant's father (HH 1) narrated:

My daughter's husband passed away during the second COVID-19 wave in April 2021. My son, who is in the Gulf, pays for the education of my daughter's children. The firstborn child is enrolled in the eighth grade, while the second is attending the fifth. (A migrant's father, village Garhara, Begusarai District. August 2023)

Remittances, in addition to improving the affordability of basic and secondary education for migrant households, have a substantial impact on facilitating access to higher education, including undergraduate degrees, diplomas, and engineering degrees. Specifically, a migrant's wife (HH 3) narrated:

Both of my sons are engineering graduates; we spent the bulk of the remittances on their education. We could not create other assets, but my sons are the greatest assets we could have. We are proud of our sons' educational achievements. Our neighbors know about our son's completion of an engineering degree. (A migrant's wife, village Garhara, Begusarai District. August 2023)

Despite many favourable effects of remittances on educational attainment, it is imperative to underscore that remittances may also function as disincentives in seeking local work and promote a culture of migration. Children of migrants tend to perceive local jobs as being inferior to Gulf jobs in terms of remuneration and other benefits. Sometimes, they refuse to work home and look for jobs in the Gulf labour market. This intention of working in the Gulf is often rooted in their exposure to remittance-provided life styles. Specifically, a migrant's wife (HH 3) recounted:

Both of my sons, who are engineering graduates, are reluctant to pursue employment opportunities due to their perception that those opportunities do not align with their interests. They are still unemployed. They have minimal interest in working in India. They fail to comprehend the extent of their father's sacrifices in facilitating their education. (A migrant's wife, village Garhara, Begusarai District. August 2023)

There are notable differences in Gulf households' educational accomplishments compared to non-migrant households. Gulf households acquired higher education levels in primary and higher education, while non-migrant households lag behind. One main reason for the apparent educational disparities is exorbitant education expenses. Non-migrant households depend on government schools for their children's education. Since their school performances are unsatisfactory, they lose motivation for higher education and often join the labour market to contribute to the family's income pool. Additionally, non-migrant households had a higher school drop out rate than Gulf households. Among non-migrant households, it was observed that male children in two out of five families discontinued their education after eighth grade in one household and after ninth grade in the other household. These children then began working in the informal sector in the nearby towns of Barauni and Begusarai. Nevertheless, the disparities in educational attainment are also contingent upon variables such as family size, the number of individuals contributing financially to the household, and the educational qualifications of the household heads, among other considerations.

Social relations: Gulf wives, Gulf parents, and Gulf siblings

Households are analysed from different perspectives when it comes to South Asian migration to the Arab Gulf states. Various concepts are introduced to refer to different members of households, including ‘migrant wives’ to refer to wives of migrants working overseas (Luna and Rahman 2019), ‘Gulf wives’ to refer to wives of Gulf migrants (Zachariah, Mathew, and Rajan 2001), and ‘Gulf husbands’ to refer to migrant husbands living in the Gulf (Gupta 2015). Like ‘Gulf wives’ and ‘Gulf husbands’, we refer to parents and siblings of Gulf migrants who stay behind as ‘Gulf parents’ and ‘Gulf siblings’ for convenience. We observe some changes in the traditional roles of Gulf wives, parents, and siblings and shed light on them here.

Four out of five Gulf wives were living in a joint family setting with their in-laws. Among these Gulf wives, two were homemakers, while one operated a personal beauty salon, and the other was a primary school teacher. Overall, it is observed that Gulf wives have varied experiences in terms of increased financial independence, enhanced mobility, greater autonomy in making decisions regarding remittances, and enhanced connectivity with the external world. These changes are often contingent upon various factors, such as (a) the duration of their husbands’ residency in the Gulf region, (b) the duration of their marriage, (c) the number of dependents and alternative sources of income, (d) the age of children, (e) their own educational attainment, and (f) the family structure, specifically residing in either a joint or a nuclear family arrangement. Considering the length of the paper, we reflect on only a few issues here. For instance, we noticed a higher degree of democratisation of gender relations in the husband-wife communication channels when it comes to making decisions affecting household governance issues, thanks to access to mobile phones and telecommunication advancements. A migrant’s wife (HH 4) narrated:

While I am responsible for taking decisions on significant family matters, I ensure to seek inputs from my husband before reaching a final decision via mobile call to my husband. (A migrant’s wife, village Garhara, Begusarai District. August 2023)

Generally speaking, rural India tends to show conservative inclinations when it comes to contact with outside world (Singh 2005). This issue becomes more delicate for Gulf wives, particularly those who are not married for long. In addition, if a Gulf wife wishes to operate her own business, the matter becomes contentious within the household. One of the Gulf wives we surveyed runs her own beauty salon in the neighbourhood. Initially, the family opposed her occupation, but later accepted it as it provided additional disposable income for her household. One Gulf wife was also a school teacher and highly respected at the family and community levels for her job. However, Gulf wives who are not involved in income-generating activities face opposition to physical mobility outside the community. Since Gulf wives need to fulfil various responsibilities in the absence of their husbands, and it seems that other household members are increasingly accepting this new reality and making adjustments to the daily schedule. These duties include accompanying their children and in-laws to medical care, accessing banking services, and participating in social and religious events. A migrant’s wife (HH 2) narrated:

When I have to go out, I usually take my brother-in-law or other male family members. Though my in-laws do not say anything, society here does not like women with young

kids venturing out of the confines of the house alone. (A migrant's wife, village Garhara, Begusarai District. August 2023)

While Gulf households enjoy increased mobility, financial independence, and democratisation of gender relations across the husband-wife corridor, these gains come at substantial emotional and physical costs. Gulf wives often expressed a feeling of loneliness and excessive familial obligations. Incidences of divorce and separation are not unique in Gulf households in South Asia (Rahman 2009). We came to know some instances of separation and divorce at the community level including our surveyed households. As one migrant's father (HH 5) narrated the story of his daughter-in-law eloping with all the accumulated savings they had from remittances:

My daughter-in-law absconded with all family savings, leaving her husband and three children behind, to pursue a relationship with her lover. This incident tarnished our family's reputation in the community. My son currently resides in the Gulf, and we take care of his children. (A migrant's father, village Garhara, Begusarai District. August 2023)

In Gulf households, parents often assume the role of moral guardians for households. Parents are also the recipients of remittances, and they control and manage them for the households. Since surveyed households live in joint families and Indian joint families are usually headed by parents or senior male members (Singh 2005), it is not a surprise to see the dominance of parents in household affairs. Parents were the recipients of three of our five surveyed households, and they also assumed the role of household heads; they were respected, consulted, and approached for household expenses and governance issues. The interviews also revealed that management and control of remittances appeared to be a delicate matter at the Gulf households. They were sources of frequent interpersonal conflicts among household members, particularly among migrant wives and parents.

Finally, siblings are an integral part of the Gulf households in the joint family system in India (Singh 2005). Gulf siblings tend to assume many responsibilities for their families. Brothers tend to take on a range of tasks, such as escorting female family members to various public spaces, including marketplaces, schools, and hospitals. Sisters help in household chores, in addition to taking care of children and helping with school homework for them. Moreover, some Gulf siblings, especially male members expressed an increased level of parental expectations for financial contributions to households. Correspondingly, Gulf siblings are not simply consuming household resources but also performing the gender-specific role for social reproduction.

The decision-making process in non-migrant households differs from that in migrant households in several ways. Women from non-migrant households did not show the same degree of decision-making power and access to the outside world as their counterparts from migrant households. In non-migrant households, it was primarily men who contributed to household incomes and they also lived with the households. As a result, the need for wives, siblings, and parents in running the everyday activities is not felt in the same way as in migrant households. Wives, siblings, and parents in non-migrant households, if they are not employed, tended to perform general household chores as per traditional gender norms.

Medical care

The accessibility and affordability of healthcare facilities have long been a significant concern for economically disadvantaged groups in the North-Eastern states of India (Gogoi et al. 2021). In rural areas, people with chronic diseases often borrow money from others, including moneylenders, for medical care expenses. The financial burden associated with expensive medical treatments undermines the economic status of families, often resulting in their households being trapped in a cycle of poverty. Interviews conducted with a Gulf household (HH 1) revealed that medical debt accrued during the treatment of the migrant's mother was a significant driving force behind their decision to migrate to the Gulf. For migrant families, remittances provide a reliable source of income that allows them to pay for necessary expenses without experiencing significant financial hardship. In addition, a Gulf parent (HH 1) explained how remittances provided the financial support needed to cover the costs of his son-in-law's treatment for the COVID-19 virus.

The situation during the second phase of Covid-19 was horrific. We admitted our son-in-law to a private hospital in Begusarai District. He was hospitalized for nearly seven days. Had it not been for the financial assistance provided by our migrant son from the Gulf, we would have faced significant hardship in meeting medical care expenses for him. Unfortunately, I could not save him. (A migrant's father, village Garhara, District Begusarai, August 2023)

Gulf households have exhibited a discernible shift in their perceptions of healthcare following their migration to the Gulf. In the past, it was common to avoid consulting healthcare professionals for simple health issues, such as colds and influenza. In these cases, the leading cause of low medical consultation was financial constraints. Nevertheless, since the Covid-19 pandemic emerged, they have developed an urgency about common health issues. It has been usual for Gulf households to seek medical advice from healthcare professionals and take prescribed medications in cases of common ailments. Gulf households sometimes become rescuers for distant relatives or community members as we have seen for education and food security matters. Since Gulf households possess comparatively increased wealth within the community, lending financial support to relatives and neighbours whenever needed becomes a common practice. A migrant's wife (HH 4) narrated:

My sister's son met with a terrible accident last year. He had to be hospitalized in the capital city of Patna. My husband helped her pay for the hospital and treatment expenses. (A migrant's wife, village Garhara, District Begusarai, August 2023)

On the other hand, non-migrant households, in contrast to migrant households, predominantly depended on government hospitals for their medical care, because they often lacked the financial means to seek treatment at private healthcare. Government hospitals and clinics located at the grassroot level are overburdened with patients because of low fees but their service quality is often questionable to the community members. In addition, non-migrant households deemed it luxurious to seek medical advice for minor illnesses like cough, cold, and mild fever. Instead of going to private or public doctors for such illnesses, non-migrant households relied heavily on semi-qualified practitioners and traditional home remedies whenever needed. They also borrowed money to finance their medical costs for serious illness. As a result, medical care expenses often

disrupted the credit line of their households and affected their economic wellbeing for extended period. Medical care was also taxing for Gulf households because of exorbitant medical bills. Their access to remittances, however, allowed them to pay off medical-care induced debt and safeguard them from financial disruption.

Housebuilding

Housing investment displays an unremitting attachment to the households and local community, apart from paving the way for a successful return upon the completion of contract. One of the primary goals underlying labour migration often is the accumulation of capital necessary for various reasons, including asset-making (Rahman, Yong, and Ullah 2014a; 2014b). One notable asset, among various others, pertains to the building of residential properties, which involves a diverse array of operations, ranging from land acquisition, investment in commercial properties, renovation or expansion of existing housing complexes, and more. Gulf remittances are used to finance various expenses including land acquisition, labour engagement, construction materials procurement, and remuneration for architectural or engineering services. Remittances increase the ability of migrant families to build homes. This may involve the construction of larger residential structures, the incorporation of vital utilities such as indoor plumbing and electricity, and the utilisation of more resilient construction materials. Potential modifications to a residential property encompass various possibilities, such as the incorporation of further rooms, the refurbishment of kitchens and bathrooms, or the enhancement of the overall structural soundness of the dwelling. A migrant's wife (HH 3) narrated:

We did not possess enough ancestral land. Over the course of several years, we purchased land and constructed this house. As a result of my husband's work in the Gulf, we were able to build this house with his savings. (A migrant's wife, village Garhara, District Begusarai. August 2023)

Improved housing conditions or the purchase of a new home can positively impact a family's social and economic standing and their psychological and emotional wellbeing within the community. Gulf households perceive home construction as a long-term investment because it can increase in value over time, serving as an asset. However, some factors influence house construction, including the amount of remittances received and the costs associated with construction. We found that Gulf households have widespread concerns regarding misallocation or improper utilisation of remittances. It is common for Gulf households to feel pressured to build houses and to meet social expectations regarding the reconfiguration of family status within the community. In addition, purchasing land and housing properties are not free from victimisation and fraud. A migrant's father (HH 2) narrated:

My son purchased land from a land dealer in 2019. Unfortunately, that land turned out to be government land, and our ownership claim stands rejected. We had borrowed money to secure funds needed for land acquisition. Due to this debt obligation, our family's economic conditions have been adversely affected. (A migrant's father, village Garhara, District Begusarai. August 2023)

Non-migrant households were less likely to build houses, purchase land or apartments, repair old houses, and afford expensive electrical and electronic appliances. Three out of

five non-migrant households interviewed lived in their ancestral homes without significant alterations over the preceding two decades or more. The remaining two made some minor renovations by borrowing from local money lenders. This resulted in non-migrant households being forced to repay their debts with their meagre local income, which adversely affected the economic wellbeing in the long run.

Debt relations

Debts serve as both a catalyst and driving force behind their decision to migrate to the Gulf. P. Raj and Rahman has explained the debt-migration nexus in the light of three key implications in the migration process (Raj and Rahman 2023). Firstly, the debt enables potential migrants and their households to arrange the financial costs associated with migration. Secondly, it allows formal and informal lenders to make money out of the labour migration process and thus hinders migrants' ability to accumulate capital. The lion share of migrants' incomes is used to repay debt. As opposed to money lenders that charge interest rates, relatives do not charge interest rates. However, they expect financial support from them for a prolonged period of time, including paying their own family members' migrant costs. Borrowing money from relatives often entails a long-term, unlimited repayment plan. Thirdly, households tend to send members overseas for employment due to their accumulated debt, which they cannot afford to pay from their insufficient local income. Migration then appears as a strategy for debt repayment and capital accumulation.

Common sources of debt for Gulf households are loans obtained from friends, relatives, moneylenders, banks, private financial intermediaries, and other migrants employed in the Gulf. Gulf households often resort to borrowings to address a range of financial requirements even after migration such as medical expenses, marriage of family members, critical consumer purchases, acquisition of capital goods, housing construction, home renovations, land purchases among other demands (Raj and Rahman 2023). As a result, a substantial amount of remittances that migrant households receive is allocated to paying off the debts they incur in everyday capital constraints. It is important to note that borrowing from formal and informal sources is a way of economi life for rural households irrespective of migration status.

We found a distinctive trend of indebtedness in the migration process. During the early years of migration, a significant portion of the debt accumulation was attributed to covering migration expenses, obtaining loans for unanticipated medical treatments, purchasing two-wheelers, and obtaining loans for female family members' marriages. As migrants stayed longer in the Gulf, they accumulated loans to finance various capital expenses, including renovating old houses, building new houses, buying agricultural and residential lands, and buying jewellery. Additionally, it is found that the length of time they employed in the Gulf significantly influences their ability to handle debt and their attitudes towards these financial commitments. Their inclination to borrow for such expenses is a consequence of heightened confidence in their ability to repay such debts from their overseas employment. A migrant's wife (HH 3) narrated:

It has been almost two decades since my husband emigrated to the Gulf. We obtained a loan from a local bank to finance the construction of our property. We successfully paid off the load using remittances. (A migrant's wife, village Garhara, Begusarai District, August 2023)

Conversely, non-migrant households also rely on borrowing from different sources to fulfil various financial obligations, such as weddings, children's education, costs arising out of agricultural activities, business loans, medical expenses among others. However, their capacity to repay these debts is limited and erratic due to their insufficient income and subsequent savings. As a result, non-migrant households stay in debt for a longer period of time than migrant households. Additionally, non-migrant households incur debts related to consumption spending rather than capital investments. In comparison to migrant households, non-migrant households experience greater challenges obtaining loans from available formal and informal sources. Banks, money lenders or relatives often do not want to risk their investment to those non-migrant households that do not have decent sources of incomes, exposing them to a vulnerable financial condition.

Conclusion

As discussed in this paper, Gulf householding, that is, the reconfiguration of household arrangements as members migrate to the Arab Gulf states, has been a permanent feature of millions of households in the global South. Building on Douglass's notion of 'global householding', this paper has introduced the notion of 'Gulf householding' as an analytical tool to understand the formation and sustenance of Gulf households in a remote, source village in India. Labour migration from Bihar to the GCC states is predominantly a male phenomenon. Consequently, when male members migrate, it leads to significant changes in the responsibilities and obligations of the household members who stay behind. Gulf parents have often emerged as the moral guardians of the households and supervised the use and control of remittances for household expenses. Management and control over remittances have been found sometimes a point of contention among household members. Gulf wives, particularly, assume some new roles and responsibilities in the absence of their spouses working in the Gulf, leaving a room for change in traditional norms and values at the households. Accordingly, their engagement with the outside world has exposed them to challenges and opportunities beyond the household premises and paved the ways for greater voices in the decision-making process.

Gulf remittances have an overwhelming influence on almost every aspect of lives of migrant households. Compared with non-migrant households, Gulf households were able to afford more regular meals and nutritious foods. Children from Gulf households have studied in private schools, while children from non-migrant households have attended public schools with a relatively low quality of education. Gulf remittances afforded migrant households to finance higher education, seek medical care for members and build houses. Access to the Gulf labour market and remittances have contributed to the dynamics of household expenditures on consumption and investment. When remittance inflows to the household declined, for instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Gulf households still had access to credit from local grocery shops or from formal and informal sources due to their access to Gulf labour market. The perception about Gulf labour market and the power of Gulf remittances, despite constant negative reporting of exploitation, human rights violations, mistreatment, or precarious working conditions in the Gulf, remain positive and unbound and

appear more to them as a liberating force at this relatively underprivileged village that foresees slim prospect for social mobility without seeking Gulf employment. The Gulf households' relative successes consolidate and reinforce this local perception about the transformative power of the Gulf labour market and heighten hope for social mobility in the community and beyond.

In contrast, non-migrant households have found it difficult to provide their members with the corresponding social and economic well-being. Since earning members stay with them, the role of other members of the households such as parents, wives and siblings have remained somewhat unchanged, perpetuating a traditional norms and values at the households. Non-migrant households could hardly afford to high-quality food and nutrition, healthcare, education, housing, and capital accumulation with their meagre local incomes. Their ability to borrow and pay off debts was also limited due to inadequate local income, thus exposing them to vulnerable living conditions, often mired in perpetual debt obligation. Access to Gulf labour market empowered Gulf households to borrow and pay off their debts, safeguarding a better quality of life than non-migrant households. It is important to note that the need to borrow and repay debts is an inseparable part of the economic lives of rural households. Despite the common belief that household debt is a curse (Bohoslavsky 2021), it appears to be a rescuer for investment capital when households have access to overseas labour markets – a phenomenon that warrants further investigation.

This study has made a modest attempt to underscore the potential analytical power of Gulf householding at the micro level. This study claims that a small scale, in-depth village study is potential to offer valuable insights into the complex linkages between migration, householding, social reproduction, and development in a particular community and thus provide the critical advantages of micro-level qualitative studies at migration field sites in the global South. Gulf migration over the last six decades has remained unabated and remittance flows have continued to be steady and strong, impacting millions of households in the global South. Among the lines of research to be developed in this field, it would be interesting to conduct empirical investigations of Gulf households across multiple countries and regions in the global South as part of Gulf migration corridor studies and document how Gulf households experience development from below. We have suggested that the householding perspective is potential to enlighten us the complex development processes from below. However, we have not elaborated much the notion of development due to the fact that our intention was not to engage in migration-development debate but in migration and householding and suggest that we can better understand the complex relationship and its outcomes when we look at from the householding perspective. The comparison of Gulf householding with non-migrant householding also indicates that Gulf householding experiences development from below. Therefore, it would be interesting in the future to investigate the role Gulf householding plays in shaping local development in sending communities in the global South. It is important to note that the notion of Gulf householding is not limited to migrant-sending countries alone; it applies to receiving countries in the Arab Gulf states as well. There is a need for research on Gulf householding in the GCC states. Future research can look at how transnational households in the Gulf sustain and reproduce on foreign soil – a domain of research still underexplored in the Gulf.

Notes

1. The golden age of GCC remittances, May 25, 2023, *Tanglo*, Retrieved on 22 December 2023: <https://tranglo.com/blog/the-golden-age-of-gcc-remittance/>
2. IFAD Report 16 June 2023, '13 reasons-why-remittances are important', Retrieved on 23 December 2023: <https://www.ifad.org/en/web/latest/-/13-reasons-why-remittances-are-important>
3. The golden age of GCC remittances, May 25, 2023, *Tanglo*, Retrieved on 22 December 2023: <https://tranglo.com/blog/the-golden-age-of-gcc-remittance/>
4. This statistic is taken from Bilateral Remittances Matrix data published by KNOMAD. Out of a total of 89,375 million dollars of inward remittances received in India, the contribution of GCC countries are as follows: UAE (19,821 mn dollars), Saudi Arabia (13,052 mn dollars), Qatar (4432 mn dollars), Oman (6413 mn dollars), Kuwait (6356 mn dollars), and Bahrain (1833 mn dollars).
5. The conversion rate used for this study has been taken for the month of August 2023. 1 USD = 82.19 INR.

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